

BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR MAY 1

COLOSSIANS 1:21–2:7

THE BACKGROUND

After a brief greeting, Paul expressed gratitude for the Colossian Christians' faith in Christ and love for all believers. He praised Epaphras, from whom he had learned of their Spirit-generated love (1:1-8). In 1:9-14, Paul assured them of his continuing prayer for their spiritual growth. Then he emphasized Christ's sovereignty as Creator and Sustainer of the universe and as the Head of the church (1:15-20).

The Colossian Christians' redemption was evidence of God's purpose to reconcile people to Himself. Once their sin had separated them from God, but Christ's atoning death made salvation possible so they could stand before God as acquitted (1:21-22). Their responsibility was to remain faithful to the gospel (1:23).

In 1:24-29, Paul elaborated on his ministry, which he viewed as an extension of Christ's ministry. Paul preached the good news of Christ to lead people to salvation and spiritual maturity in Him. With Christ's enabling strength, Paul labored at his task.

Paul expressed his concern for the Colossian believers as well as for other Christians he hadn't seen. He wanted them to be unified and to understand God's purpose: to offer Gentiles salvation in Christ (2:1-3).

In 2:4-7, Paul warned against false teachings. Although he wasn't present with them, he was deeply interested in believers' continued soundness and faithfulness as a church.

1. HE SAVES US (COLOSSIANS 1:21-23)

Verse 21: *Once you were alienated and hostile in your minds because of your evil actions.*

Although 1:21-23 is related to what precedes in chapter 1, the passage also is related closely to 2:4-7. These two passages bookend Paul's comments about his ministry and suffering in 1:24–2:3.

The Colossian believers' salvation demonstrated God's purpose "to reconcile everything to Himself" (1:20). Once, their evil actions — wicked lifestyles — showed they were alienated from God. The phrase *because of your evil actions* literally is "in your evil works." Their former works issued from the sphere of evil in which they lived. Outside God's rule of grace, they had been hostile to Him in mind. That is,

in their mind-set or disposition, they were opposed to God — His enemies.

Verse 22: *But now He has reconciled you by His physical body through His death, to present you holy, fault-less, and blameless before Him—*

The phrase *but now* stresses the sharp contrast between the believers' former condition and their current relationship with God. Christ had made possible their being reconciled to God. Paul never stated that God had to be reconciled to people. Rather, people needed to be reconciled to Him. Their sins separated them from Him, and out of love God took the initiative in Christ to remove the barrier by forgiving the sins and bringing people into relationship with Him.

Christ's death on the cross was the means by which God effected reconciliation. Paul may have stressed Christ's physical body to counter a false teaching that Jesus wasn't really human but merely appeared to be so. The apostle stressed that Christ — fully human as well as fully divine — suffered on sinners' behalf. To Paul, Christ's physical, sacrificial death was as essential to the gospel as was His resurrection. In Christ's voluntary suffering and death for others, God made salvation available to all who would place their faith in Christ.

God's purpose in offering reconciliation through Christ's death was to make believers holy, faultless, and blameless before God. The word *holy* has the idea of being separate; Christians are set apart to God for His service and for godly living. The term *faultless* means "without blemish" — without moral guilt. The word *blameless* conveys the sense of living so that no one can level a valid accusation of wrongdoing.

The phrase *to present* could have a judicial sense and refer to believers' standing before God in the final judgment as fully acquitted because of their faith in Christ. It also may refer to Christians' continuing, daily experience of God's acceptance. Some interpreters prefer a sacrificial sense: believers would be presented to God as an offering. Whatever image Paul had in mind, his meaning is clear: God's purpose in reconciliation is to transform sinners and produce in them character befitting His people.

Verse 23: *if indeed you remain grounded and steadfast in the faith, and are not shifted away from the hope of the gospel that you heard. This gospel has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and I, Paul, have become a servant of it.*

Paul stressed believers' responsibility to remain faithful as

people reconciled to God through Jesus' death. The word *if* doesn't express doubt but has the sense of "since" or "because." Paul fully expected the Colossian Christians to remain ... in the faith — that is, their commitment to Christ. They were to stay grounded and steadfast. They weren't to allow themselves to be shifted away from the hope of the gospel — the confident assurance of salvation the gospel of Christ gave them (1:5). They weren't to move away from the gospel they had heard to embrace the false teachings being presented to them.

Paul may have used overstatement to emphasize the genuineness of the gospel the Colossian believers had heard and accepted. It was the same good news being proclaimed in all creation under heaven — that is, all across the Roman Empire. It was the good news the risen Christ had commissioned Paul to preach as His servant.

2. HE CALLS US (COLOSSIANS 1:24-29)

Verse 24: *Now I rejoice in my sufferings for you, and I am completing in my flesh what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for His body, that is, the church.*

Because of Paul's confidence that he was secure in Christ's grace no matter what he faced, he could rejoice in the midst of his sufferings. What did Paul mean by the phrase *my sufferings for you*? He hadn't been to Colossae and encountered trouble there. Likely, he had in mind the house arrest to which he was confined in Rome as well as his concerns about the problems the Colossian church faced.

Paul's statement, *I am completing in my flesh what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for His body*, is difficult. I prefer the following line of interpretation. The rare Greek word rendered *completing* literally is "filling up in turn." Christ had suffered physically to provide redemption; as Christ's follower, Paul's turn to endure physical suffering came because of his faithfulness to the task Christ had given him. The phrase *what is lacking in Christ's afflictions* doesn't mean Jesus' death on the cross was in any way insufficient. The phrase *Christ's afflictions* probably reflects Christ's close identification with His followers; their afflictions are His afflictions (see Acts 9:4-5). The word *lacking* may indicate that more suffering was in store for the church, Christ's body, as Christians extended His work.

Verse 25: *I have become its servant, according to God's administration that was given to me for you, to make God's message fully known,*

Paul had become a servant of the church, Christ's body. He didn't choose this role but received it as an administration from God. Paul was a manager of God's message — the gospel. The apostle's task was to set forth the gospel fully — to bring it to completion by proclaiming it as widely as possible.

Verse 26: *the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to His saints.*

Paul characterized the gospel as the mystery once hidden. Mystery religions abounded in Paul's time. He used their word, but with a different meaning. In the New Testament, the word *mystery* referred to something previously veiled or unknown that now was revealed. What had been obscure became clear. *For ages and generations* probably means "from the world's beginning." Through the centuries, people hadn't understood fully the scope of God's offer of redemption. With Christ's coming and the gospel's subsequent spread, what had been concealed was revealed to God's saints.

Verse 27: *God wanted to make known among the Gentiles the glorious wealth of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.*

The mystery that now had become an open secret was God's purpose to include Gentiles in His offer of salvation in Christ. Their inclusion was no afterthought. God always wanted to include them. He took delight in extending His grace to them.

The phrase *the glorious wealth of this mystery* literally is "the wealth of the glory of this mystery." The gospel is the announcement of the lavish, inexhaustible supply of God's grace available to all who will respond to Him through faith in Christ. Personal commitment to Christ issues in His residing in believers, which gives confident assurance in the present and for future life in God's immediate presence.

Verse 28: *We proclaim Him, warning and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ.*

The pronoun *we* is emphatic, perhaps to contrast Christ's evangelists to false teachers. Christian preachers centered their message in Christ, warning everyone about their practices and teaching everyone Christian doctrine. Unlike the false teaching of salvation through secret knowledge exclusive to a few people, the gospel's wisdom was available to all people. The purpose of proclamation was to present everyone spiritually mature.

Verse 29: *I labor for this, striving with His strength that*

works powerfully in me.

Paul worked toward the goal of having all believers reach spiritual maturity. The Greek word translated *labor* has the sense of toil to the point of exhaustion. The term rendered *striving* conveys the idea of strenuous effort, of struggling with difficulties and dangers. Paul didn't work hard in his own strength but with the effective energy of Christ, who energized Paul with His power.

3. HE BLESSES US (COLOSSIANS 2:1-3)

Verse 1: *For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you, for those in Laodicea, and for all who have not seen me in person.*

Paul likely hadn't preached in Colossae or Laodicea, a city 10 miles west of Colossae. Nevertheless, he continued to have a great struggle for believers there and for all Christians who hadn't seen him. The Greek term rendered *struggle* gives us the English word *agony*. It was used of strenuous exertion in athletics. Paul's struggle probably included inner agonizing in prayer, deep anxiety concerning the believers, and a desire for their spiritual growth.

Verse 2: *I want their hearts to be encouraged and joined together in love, so that they may have all the riches of assured understanding and have the knowledge of God's mystery—Christ.*

Paul's ongoing concern for believers who hadn't seen him was that their hearts might be encouraged or strengthened. They needed spiritual strength to reject the false teachings to which they were being subjected. In addition, believers needed to be joined together in love. That kind of unity would guard against divisions caused by false teachings.

Spiritual strength and unity in love would issue in riches of assured understanding — keen insight that would enable believers to judge accurately between the truth in Christ and false teachers' empty doctrines. Believers had all they needed: the knowledge of God's mystery — the gospel of salvation available to all people in Christ.

Verse 3: *All the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden in Him.*

False teachers claimed they had exclusive, superior knowledge people needed to experience salvation. Paul countered that in Christ all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden. Christ is the Storehouse in whom God's resources are gathered. Christ is Wisdom, and He dispenses wisdom. The word *hidden* may indicate that God had revealed the

location of His wisdom and knowledge or that while believers understand something about Christ, much more awaits them as they mature in their relationship with Him.

4. HE PROTECTS US (COLOSSIANS 2:4-7)

Verse 4: *I am saying this so that no one will deceive you with persuasive arguments.*

Paul was concerned that the Colossian Christians might fall victim to false teachers' glib presentations. The Greek term rendered *deceive* originally meant "to cheat by false reckoning" and then "to delude." Paul didn't want believers to be misled by smooth-talking hucksters' false reasoning.

Verse 5: *For I may be absent in body, but I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see how well ordered you are and the strength of your faith in Christ.*

Though Paul couldn't be physically present with the Colossian believers, he was with them in spirit. He used two related military images to express the basis of the joy they brought him. The phrase *well ordered* translates a Greek term that has the sense of an unbroken line of soldiers. Some believers may have bought into the false teachers' polished speech, but most were holding the line. The word rendered *strength* has the idea of soldiers closing ranks to form a phalanx. Most believers were maintaining their faith in Christ — their personal commitment to Him.

Verse 6: *Therefore as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, walk in Him,*

The Colossian believers had heard the gospel and had accepted it. By faith, they had received Jesus Christ the Lord. They hadn't merely believed truths about Him; they had entered a personal relationship with Him. Paul urged the believers to maintain and strengthen their relationship with Christ. To walk in Him means to continue to live in the sphere of His lordship — in relationship with Him.

Verse 7: *rooted and built up in Him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, overflowing with gratitude.*

Paul used the figures of a tree or plant and a building to exhort believers to remain firm in their faith. The tense of the Greek word translated *rooted* points to believers' past conversions, whose effects continued. Thus Christ alone was the Source of their new life, and only He could provide the spiritual nutrients they needed. The Greek term rendered *built up* conveys ongoing action; in the sphere of Christ's lordship, believers were in the process of construction — "one brick at a time," we might say. The word *established*

also conveys continuous action and has the idea of becoming more stable or being strengthened. The phrase *just as you were taught* refers to the instructions Epaphras had given the Colossian Christians. They were to hold to those teachings. As their relationship with Christ guided their living, and as they continued to grow spiritually, they were to overflow with gratitude.

BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR MAY 8

COLOSSIANS 2:8-23

THE BACKGROUND

In Colossians 2:1-7, Paul expressed concern for believers he hadn't visited. He wanted them to be strengthened and united in love. He warned against deceptive arguments and indicated his joy that the church was still sound.

Paul then further addressed the heretical teachings that glib charlatans were presenting in Colossae (2:8-15). He termed the teachings "philosophy and empty deceit" (2:8). These false teachers evidently touted worship of astral deities alongside Christ. Paul countered that Christ is Deity and superior to all other so-called deities. Another element of the heresy promoted circumcision as necessary for converts to be real Christians. Paul reminded believers that through Christ's atoning death and triumphant resurrection, God had provided salvation and victory over all "rulers and authorities" (2:15).

In 2:16-19, Paul refuted false teachers' insistence that believers observe Jewish food laws and festivals. He also denounced "ascetic practices" and angel worship (2:19). Paul warned against anyone who claimed access to special revelation.

Paul asked the reason that any believer would go back to living according to the world's elemental forces. He also questioned some Christians' observing Jewish regulations. He pointed out that while these regulations claimed to dispense wisdom (2:20-22), they couldn't prevent "fleshly indulgence" (2:23).

1. RECOGNIZE THE LIES (COLOSSIANS 2:8-12)

Verse 8: *Be careful that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit based on human tradition, based on the elemental forces of the world, and not based on Christ.*

Paul's strong warning that believers be careful has the force of "beware," "be on guard," or "watch out." They were to see to it that no one took them captive — lured them away from the truth to make them slaves to false doctrine. The bogus teachers' so-called philosophy actually was empty trickery. The false teaching was based on human tradition, not on revelation from God.

Paul further declared that the false teaching was based on the elemental forces of the world. He likely referred to the persuasive teachers' combining worship of spirit-beings with Jewish regulations and rites. The false teachings in Colossae weren't based on Christ. With that assertion, Paul declared that Christ is the sole Standard for judging truth. False teachers argued that astrology, secret knowledge, and Jewish ceremonialism were keys to salvation. Paul emphatically declared, "Not so!" Christ alone is sufficient for salvation and Christian living.

Verse 9: *For the entire fullness of God's nature dwells bodily in Christ,*

Paul gave the basis for his claim concerning Christ's centrality and superiority. The phrase *the entire fullness of God's nature* expressed Christ's having God's essence — of Christ's being Deity. The Greek word rendered *dwells* has the sense of residing permanently. The term *bodily* refers to the incarnation — Christ's being truly human. In His preexistence and incarnation, Christ was Deity. He remains so after His ascension. In this statement, Paul refuted the false teaching that Christ actually wasn't human but only seemed to be. He also countered the teaching that distinguished between the human Jesus and the eternal Christ.

Verse 10: *and you have been filled by Him, who is the head over every ruler and authority.*

The statement, you have been filled by Him, literally is, "You are in Him having been made full." When believers placed their faith in Christ, they received total salvation — all they needed. Nothing else was required to supplement their redemption. The One in whom the fullness of Deity resides gave them fullness of life. His doing so is evidence that He's sovereign over every ruler and authority — likely a reference to the false teachers' angelic mediators.

Verse 11: *You were also circumcised in Him with a circumcision not done with hands, by putting off the body of flesh, in the circumcision of the Messiah.*

The false teachers at Colossae probably combined the pagan belief in astral deities with Jewish ceremonial practices. In this view, they were Gnostics who claimed to have special, secret knowledge that brought salvation. A second view is that the teachers were Jewish Christians fascinated by supernatural beings and intent on having believers observe the rite of circumcision and adopt Jewish customs. Most likely, however, the heresy at Colossae was a mixture of Gnostic and Jewish elements; it promoted secret knowledge for salvation,

worship of astral deities, and Jewish ceremonialism.

Whatever the false teachers' precise identity, they evidently insisted that male Gentile converts to Christianity had to be circumcised in order to be fully Christian. Paul declared that Gentile believers had experienced spiritual circumcision. They hadn't been circumcised physically, but by faith in Christ they had entered a covenant relationship with God. They had put off the body of flesh. The word *flesh* referred to the realm dominated by evil. The Gentile converts had left that sphere and placed themselves under Christ's lordship.

Verse 12: *Having been buried with Him in baptism, you were also raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead.*

Paul pointed the Colossian believers to their experience of baptism following their conversions. Their immersion in water pictured their old life's being buried with Christ; their rising from the water symbolized their being raised to new life in Him. The same power that raised Christ from the dead raised believers from spiritual death. Resurrection life came not through circumcision or baptism but through faith in the working of God.

2. REMEMBER THE TRUTH (COLOSSIANS 2:13-15)

Verse 13: *And when you were dead in trespasses and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive with Him and forgave us all our trespasses.*

Paul reminded believers that Christ had given them victory over sin, death, and evil powers. Before they heard the gospel and placed their faith in Christ, they were spiritually dead in trespasses. They willfully had rebelled against the admittedly limited revelation of God they had received. Furthermore, they were dead in the uncircumcision of their flesh. Likely, the word *flesh* has the sense of their living apart from God in the sphere dominated by evil, and the term *uncircumcision* refers to their lives before they were brought into relationship with God through Christ (2:11).

When the Colossian believers responded to Christ in faith, He made them alive with Him. The pronoun *He* probably refers to God, with the term *Him* referring to Christ. God raised the Colossian believers from spiritual death to share in Christ's resurrection life (2:12). In doing so, God graciously pardoned them — He forgave them all their trespasses. The Greek term rendered *forgave* has the sense of a gift of grace. With the plurals *us* and *our*, Paul included himself and other

believers as sinners whom God had forgiven.

Verse 14: *He erased the certificate of debt, with its obligations, that was against us and opposed to us, and has taken it out of the way by nailing it to the cross.*

Through Christ's death on the cross, God erased the certificate of debt, with its obligations, that was against us and opposed to us. The certificate of debt was an IOU the debtor wrote and signed. The obligations to which Paul referred probably were the Mosaic law's demands or decrees. They were against people and opposed to them because individuals couldn't keep the regulations; the legal requirements comprised a debt people couldn't pay.

Paul declared that God had taken people's note of debt out of the way. Literally, He had permanently taken it "out of the midst" — had removed it as a barrier between people and God. He had done so through Christ's atoning death on the cross. The phrase *nailing it to the cross* may have the idea of God's giving public notice that Christ's voluntary, vicarious self-giving destroyed the note.

Verse 15: *He disarmed the rulers and authorities and disgraced them publicly; He triumphed over them by Him.*

In addition to canceling people's sin debt, Christ's atoning death disarmed the rulers and authorities. The word translated *disarmed* means "stripped off" and presents God's stripping off the enemies' armor — making spoil of them. The rulers and authorities were hostile powers, including angelic beings the false teachers claimed had authority over humans. God disgraced these false deities publicly, as a Roman general paraded captives behind his chariot while his people cheered his victory. God triumphed over them by in Christ.

3. RESIST TEMPTATION (COLOSSIANS 2:16-19)

Verse 16: *Therefore don't let anyone judge you in regard to food and drink or in the matter of a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day.*

Apparently, the false teachers were criticizing the Colossian Christians for not observing Jewish dietary laws and rites. Paul stressed they weren't to allow Jewish rules about abstaining from eating certain foods (clean and unclean meats) and from drinking wine to determine their diets. Such rules were designed to curry favor with the false teachers' deities. Likewise, believers weren't to let anyone coerce them into observing a festival, a new moon, or a sabbath day to please the false teacher's gods. Believers' grace-

based lives had no need for legalistic practices.

Verse 17: *These are a shadow of what was to come; the substance is the Messiah.*

Paul asserted that the Jewish dietary regulations and festivals were merely a shadow of what was to come. The word *shadow* has the sense of an image cast by an object — a resemblance or vague copy. These religious elements were temporary and less significant than the reality to which they pointed. The term *substance* literally is "body." Christ cast the shadow; that is, He's the reality to whom the shadow pointed.

Verse 18: *Let no one disqualify you, insisting on ascetic practices and the worship of angels, claiming access to a visionary realm and inflated without cause by his unspiritual mind.*

The Greek word rendered *disqualify* means "to decide against" and was used of a judge in an athletic contest depriving a victor of the prize. Evidently the false teachers claimed authority to determine who merited rewards as Christians, particularly future rewards. Paul didn't want any purveyor of error to rob believers of the joy and grace-gifts of their relationship with Christ.

Believers were to ignore any religious charlatan who insisted that they adopt ascetic practices and the worship of angels. Likely, Paul was referring to fasting as a show of false humility. The word *angels* either reflects the Jewish concept of angels as mediators or the so-called powers that influenced people's lives. Believers were to reject the false teaching that advocated giving lesser or non-existent beings the worship due only to God.

The false teachers claimed to have had visions of spiritual realities not accessible to ordinary people. They maintained their visions proved them right in their teachings and made them spiritually superior. Paul warned believers against anyone who made the claim of special revelation.

The false teachers' sense of spiritual superiority caused them to be puffed up with false pride. This conceit was generated by their unspiritual mind —

Verse 19: *He doesn't hold on to the head, from whom the whole body, nourished and held together by its ligaments and tendons, develops with growth from God.*

Paul's final description of the false teachers pointed to their fatal defect: they had no relationship with Christ. Paul asserted the false teachers weren't connected to the church's Head — Christ. These peddlers of heresy received

no spiritual nourishment. They were separated from the One who is the Truth and Life. Believers who subscribed to the false teachers' system couldn't grow spiritually. Only in vital relationship with Christ would they be nourished and receive growth from God.

4. REFUSE TO COMPROMISE (COLOSSIANS 2:20-23)

Verse 20: *If you died with the Messiah to the elemental forces of this world, why do you live as if you still belonged to the world? Why do you submit to regulations:*

Evidently some Colossian Christians had fallen victim to the false teachers' heresy. Paul asked these believers a penetrating question. The term *if* has the force of "since" or "because." All genuine Christians had died with the Messiah to the elemental forces of this world. The phrase *elemental forces* likely referred to the spirit-beings and basic Jewish regulations and rites that were the false teachings' linchpins. When the Colossians placed their faith in Christ, they received new life that was free from fear of spirit-beings and bondage to elementary principles of Judaism. Why, then, were some believers living as if they still belonged to the world? They hadn't lost their salvation. They had died to their old lives and had been raised to new life under Christ's lordship. To submit to Jewish regulations was to move into the sphere of legalism and to allow those regulations to shape their lives. The result was spiritual regression rather than spiritual growth.

Verse 21: *"Don't handle, don't taste, don't touch"?*

Paul gave three examples of regulations the false teachers had taken to the extreme. The three prohibitions he quoted likely pertained to food and drink. Some interpreters include material objects. The false teachers maintained that for believers to be ritually clean and truly religious, they couldn't handle, taste, or touch certain foods and drinks — and perhaps other material things.

Verse 22: *All these regulations refer to what is destroyed by being used up; they are commands and doctrines of men.*

The objects were destroyed by being used up. People consumed food that went through the digestive process. Material items were temporary. In addition, the enslaving religious rules and empty teachings were human in origin; they didn't come from God.

Verse 23: *Although these have a reputation of wisdom by promoting ascetic practices, humility, and severe treatment of*

the body, they are not of any value in curbing self-indulgence.

The human commands and doctrines (2:22) had the appearance of wisdom. Paul likely intended to contrast what passed for wisdom to genuine wisdom from God. These rules and teachings promoted ascetic practices — a rigorous self-imposed devotion. The term *humility* carries the sense of false and exaggerated abasement, such as pretentious fasting. The phrase *severe treatment of the body* refers to extreme self-denial designed to impress people with the adherents' devotion. Paul asserted that the false teachers' regulations and rituals couldn't overcome self-indulgence; that is, such practices couldn't change people redemptively at the center of their lives; only God through Christ could do so.

BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR MAY 15

COLOSSIANS 3:1-17

THE BACKGROUND

Paul moved from warning believers against the false teachings being peddled in Colossae to instructing them concerning their new life in Christ. Instead of living by worldly standards, they were to pursue the loftier goals revealed in Christ (3:1-2). Paul reminded them they had died to their old lives and had been raised to new life with Christ (3:3). At His return, they would be “revealed with Him in glory” (3:4).

In 3:5-11, Paul admonished believers to rid themselves of attitudes and actions that were characteristic of the sphere dominated by evil. These had characterized their old lives, but in their relationship with Christ they had been made new and progressively were reflecting God’s character (3:10). In Christ, human distinctions had been removed; all believers were one in His body, the church.

After listing attitudes and actions believers were to jettison, Paul cataloged the Christian characteristics believers were to have and demonstrate (3:12-17). As God’s people, they were to pattern their lifestyles after the model Christ presented. They were to do everything according to His spirit or attitude while giving thanks to God.

1. THE SOURCE OF SIN (COLOSSIANS 3:1-4)

Verse 1: *So if you have been raised with the Messiah, seek what is above, where the Messiah is, seated at the right hand of God.*

The term *so* connects what follows with “if you died with Christ” in Colossians 2:20. The term *if* has the force of “because.” Believers had died to sin’s rule and had been raised with Christ to new life. Thus they were to seek what is above — the lofty qualities of character that Christ revealed. He’s seated at God’s right hand, the position of honor, majesty, and power. Believers consistently were to make the victorious, reigning Christ their priority — to center their lives in Him.

Verse 2: *Set your minds on what is above, not on what is on the earth.*

Believers were to set their minds on what’s above. The Greek word translated *set your minds on* has the idea of continually focusing total attention on something. Such focus involves affections, will, and intellect. The phrase *what is above* essentially refers to Christ’s character traits. The

words *what is on the earth* refer to worldly goals and values.

Verse 3: *For you have died, and your life is hidden with the Messiah in God.*

Believers had died spiritually to their old, sinful way of life. Because of that complete break, their lives were hidden with Christ in God. Three interpretations of Paul’s statement are possible. (1) He may have had in mind their spiritual safety and security. (2) The words could’ve pointed to Christ as the Source of believers’ new quality of life. (3) Paul may have meant that in the present they couldn’t grasp the fullness of their life in Christ. In light of verse 4, a combination of (2) and (3) seems likely.

Verse 4: *When the Messiah, who is your life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory.*

Believers’ lives were to demonstrate love for and faithfulness to Christ. His being revealed referred to His return, when all people will acknowledge His lordship (see Philippians 2:9-11). Also, Christians will realize the fullness of their new life in Christ. The phrase *in glory* refers to more than Christ’s radiant splendor. The term *glory* indicates God’s character revealed as redemptive. All people will see Christ for who He is and will recognize believers as reflecting His character.

2. THE DANGER OF SIN (COLOSSIANS 3:5-11)

Verse 5: *Therefore, put to death what belongs to your worldly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desire, and greed, which is idolatry.*

Because a believer’s life centered on Christ, they were to put to death worldly elements in their lives. They had to remove every facet — every expression — of the old, sin-dominated life. Worldly values, goals, attitudes, and actions were incompatible with their new life in Christ.

Paul addressed sexual immorality and listed five vices believers were to eliminate from their lives. In his day, sexual promiscuity among pagans was rampant. Believers were to make a complete break with an immoral lifestyle. The Greek word translated *sexual immorality* was an umbrella term for all sinful sexual activity, whether by married or unmarried people. The word *impurity* expanded the range to include unclean thoughts and words as well as actions. Here, the Greek term rendered *lust* has the sense of uncontrolled sexual urges. The phrase *evil desire* includes sinful sexual desire and broadens the scope to all evil passions.

The Greek word translated *greed* has the idea of a feverish desire for something someone else has or for something not

yet obtained. Here, the term probably refers to unrestrained pursuit of sexual pleasure. Such greed is idolatry. Self becomes the center of life, and life’s energies are focused on self-gratification.

Verse 6: *Because of these, God’s wrath comes on the disobedient,*

The vices listed bring God’s wrath on people who habitually practice them. God’s wrath is His settled opposition to sin, not the emotion of anger. If people choose to disobey God and insist on their sinful course, He’ll give them over to their choice. Evil, however, has within it the seeds of its own destruction and will work its way out to its inevitable result: death. Disobedient people make themselves God’s enemies.

Verse 7: *and you once walked in these things when you were living in them.*

Before the Colossian believers became Christians, they practiced the vices Paul listed. The word *walked* means “lived.” The five sins were characteristic of believers’ former lifestyles. The phrase *when you were living in them* may refer to the inner principle of evil that generated their sinful practices.

Verse 8: *But now you must also put away all the following: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and filthy language from your mouth.*

The words *but now* contrasted believers’ old lifestyles to their new life in Christ. Paul listed five elements believers were to put away. Three sins pertain to attitudes and two concern speech. Thus Paul emphasized that sinful attitudes and words are as serious as sinful acts.

The Greek term translated *anger* is the word Paul used in 3:6 for God’s wrath. When it refers to a human attitude, it has the sense of a continuing, seething resentment toward others. The word rendered *wrath* also can be understood as “rage” — a sudden, heated outburst of temper that dies down quickly. The term rendered *malice* conveys the idea of ill will that awaits an opportunity to inflict intentional harm. These attitudes had no place in believers’ lives.

Paul urged believers to get rid of two kinds of speech. The Greek term translated *slander* means “speaking critically of another person with the intent to hurt.” The Greek term rendered *filthy language* has the sense of obscene and abusive speech.

Verse 9: *Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old self with its practices*

Paul stressed that truthfulness was to be a mark of be-

lievers' lifestyle. The phrase *do not lie* can have the force of "stop lying." Their relationships with one another and their witness to unbelievers required truth and honesty. Lying, dishonesty, and deceit had characterized their pagan lifestyles; but because they had put off the old self, they were to shed these practices as they would discard old, ragged, filthy clothing.

Verse 10: *and have put on the new self. You are being renewed in knowledge according to the image of your Creator.*

At conversion, believers had put on the new self. In Greek, the tense of the verbs translated "put off" (3:9) and put on (3:10) convey once-for-all action. When believers placed their faith in Christ, He gave them a new nature governed by His grace. The new self is being renewed in knowledge. Christ works in believers to facilitate a process of renewal — of their continuing to gain new insights into and understanding of God's will. False teachers in Colossae offered secret knowledge they claimed was necessary for people to be fully Christian. Paul countered that Christ in believers progressively was supplying them with the knowledge they needed. He was nurturing them in the process of spiritual growth.

Christ's creative work in Christians was restoring or reproducing God's image in them. God created humans in His image (see Genesis 1:26,28) — to be like Him. When they sinned (see Genesis 3), they became less than He intended; and the image was marred. Through Christ, God was achieving His original purpose of creating a new people who reflected His character.

Verse 11: *In Christ there is not Greek and Jew, circumcision and uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all.*

The phrase *in Christ* refers to God's new people. The phrase *there is not* has the force of "there cannot be," "there cannot exist." It expresses the impossibility of humanly devised barriers among God's new people.

First, no racial barrier can exist. Jews divided humanity into two groups: Jews and non-Jews (Greeks or Gentiles). God's new creation is made up of one new race: people saved by grace.

Second, no religious barrier separates Christians. Jews viewed the circumcision as members of God's covenant community and the uncircumcision as outside the covenant. In Christ, all believers are within the scope of God's grace.

Third, social or cultural barriers have no place among believers. Barbarians were people who didn't speak Greek;

Greeks and Romans looked on all others as barbarians. Scythian referred to savage nomads from what today is south Russia. Both groups were cruel and uncivilized. Believers were to consider people converted from these groups as brothers and sisters in Christ.

Fourth, economic barriers are removed from the community of faith. Slaves were on the lowest rung of the economic ladder; people who were free — especially slave owners — were relatively well-off. Yet in Christ, they both enjoyed the same status: Christian.

Christ is all and in all. He's the Sphere in which all believers live, and He's all that ultimately matters. Also, He lives in each Christian, who represents Him to all other believers. Thus faith and love remove earthly categories in God's new people. The result is His people's oneness.

3. FREEDOM FROM SIN (COLOSSIANS 3:12-17)

Verse 12: *Therefore, God's chosen ones, holy and loved, put on heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience,*

New people in Christ were to put on certain virtues as they would don new clothes. Paul addressed them with three descriptive terms. They were God's chosen ones. Through faith in Christ, they had taken their place among God's people. Believers were holy — set aside for God's service and for moral purity. They also were loved; they lived in God's love. Paul's descriptive terms offered strong motivation for believers to incorporate the qualities of character that followed.

Paul listed five attributes of believers as new people in Christ. The phrase *heartfelt compassion* conveys the idea of feeling so deeply with others who are hurting that a person shares their pain. The Greek word translated *kindness* has the idea of goodness, of considering others' good to be as important as a person's own. Humility is a healthy view of oneself in which a person thinks neither too highly nor too negatively of self. It also involves willingness to forgo rights and privileges to help others. Gentleness has the sense of strength that is controlled and channeled constructively. Patience literally is "longsuffering" — enduring difficulties, slights, or wrongs for a long time without retaliating.

Verse 13: *accepting one another and forgiving one another if anyone has a complaint against another. Just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you must also forgive.*

Paul added two character qualities to his list. The Greek term rendered *accepting* means "putting up with." Believers

were to endure offenses patiently. The word translated *forgiving* has the sense of pardoning others as a gift of grace. If a believer had a complaint against another Christian, the offended person was to take the initiative to forgive the offender as the Lord graciously had forgiven the one offended. Christians were to take the initiative to forgive others because of their personal experience of Christ's forgiveness.

Verse 14: *Above all, put on love—the perfect bond of unity.*

Above all literally is "over all." As an outer garment covering the items Paul had listed, believers were to put on love — agape, determined good will that seeks others' best interests. Such persistent good will is the perfect bond of unity.

Verse 15: *And let the peace of the Messiah, to which you were also called in one body, control your hearts. Be thankful.*

Christ had called believers to His peace — spiritual wholeness under His lordship. The phrase *in one body* implies believers' oneness under Christ's rule as the Head of His body, the church. They were to allow Christ's gift of spiritual health to exercise control at the center of their lives. Gratitude was to be a continuing characteristic of their life together. The exhortation to be thankful applied especially to corporate worship.

Verse 16: *Let the message about the Messiah dwell richly among you, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, and singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, with gratitude in your hearts to God.*

Paul admonished believers to let the message about the Messiah dwell richly among them. Christ's word — the genuine message as opposed to the false teachers' empty substitute — was to continue to have priority in the church. The phrase *among you* likely referred to the church as a whole. The word *richly* has the idea of flourishing or being abundant.

Paul pointed to three ongoing activities that should issue from Christ's indwelling word or message. *Teaching* referred to instruction in Christian living. *Admonishing* involved warning against false teachings and encouraging one another. Mutual instruction and encouragement were to be offered in all wisdom — carefully, tactfully, and with the right motive.

Singing joyfully expresses worship and praise. *Psalms* were Old Testament songs of faith that originally were sung to musical accompaniment. *Hymns* were songs of praise and probably were Christian compositions. *Spiritual songs* may have been spontaneous melodies or compositions similar to today's gospel songs. Believers' joyful singing was to express to God the constant gratitude that flowed from their hearts.

Verse 17: *And whatever you do, in word or in deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.*

Paul urged believers to do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus. *Name* is a synonym for person. Thus the phrase is the same as “in Christ” — in close relationship with Him. The words *in the name of* can mean “in the authority or power of.” Jesus supplies power for Christian living. The title *the Lord Jesus* stressed that they were to represent their Savior and Master well in their daily lives.

Paul again emphasized believers’ expressing gratitude to God the Father. God was believers’ Father in the sense that they were members of His family through faith in Christ. Their joyful gratitude was channeled through Christ, who made possible their relationship with the Father.

BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR MAY 22

COLOSSIANS 3:18–4:18

THE BACKGROUND

Following his admonitions to believers concerning their life together as Christians (3:12-17), Paul addressed family life. He issued specific guidelines to wives, husbands, children, fathers, slaves, and slaveholders (3:18–4:1).

In 4:2-6, Paul dealt with the subject of prayer and asked believers to pray that he might have opportunity to preach the gospel. They were to seize every opportunity to relate wisely to unbelievers. Paul advised them to consider carefully how they spoke.

Paul's closing remarks in 4:7-18 touched on several subjects. He would send Tychicus with the Letter to the Colossians; and Onesimus, a fellow Christian, would accompany Tychicus. Tychicus would inform believers concerning Paul's welfare (4:7-9). Paul conveyed greetings from people with him (4:10-14). Then he asked that his greetings be extended to the Laodicean believers and to Nympha as well as to the church that met in her home (4:15). Paul instructed the Colossian believers to have his letter read aloud and then to send it to the Laodicean church. The church at Colossae also was to read a letter Paul had written to the Laodicean Christians (4:16).

Paul encouraged Archippus to apply himself to the ministry Christ had assigned him. Then Paul signed his name and penned a benediction (4:17-18).

1. LIVE FOR THE LORD (COLOSSIANS 3:23-25)

Verse 23: *Whatever you do, do it enthusiastically, as something done for the Lord and not for men,*

Paul's instructions in 3:23-25 originally applied to Christian slaves, but the principles they contain are valid for all believers. Whatever task their masters assigned them, slaves were to work enthusiastically — literally, “from the soul.” The Greek phrase conveys personal interest. Taken with “wholeheartedly” in 3:22, Paul stressed they were to work willingly with integrity as honest labor offered to Christ.

Verse 24: *knowing that you will receive the reward of an inheritance from the Lord. You serve the Lord Christ.*

Paul knew that most slaves' lives were hard and were lived on the edge of subsistence. They were on their society's lowest social and economic level; they usually had few if any

possessions and had no rights of inheritance. Paul assured them Christ would reward them with an inheritance — an allotment in His eternal kingdom. They would receive His commendation and live in His presence in eternity. Paul emphasized that they served the Lord Christ, their Master and Messiah. The Greek term rendered *you serve* can be translated “you are serving” or as an imperative, “serve.” Either way, their daily service was done primarily for Christ, not for human masters.

Verse 25: *For the wrongdoer will be paid back for whatever wrong he has done, and there is no favoritism.*

This verse is open to three interpretations. (1) Paul may have warned slaves they couldn't use their lowly, difficult station as an excuse for committing wrong. Because God is impartial, He wouldn't favor slaves or excuse their sins because of their forced servitude. (2) Paul may have indicated that masters would be penalized for mistreating their slaves. The slaves could be confident that God would mete out justice. (3) The verse could apply to both slaves and masters. This view, however, seems unlikely because the word *for* connects 3:25 with 3:22-24, which specifically is addressed to slaves.

2. LIVE WISELY (COLOSSIANS 4:2-6)

Verse 2: *Devote yourselves to prayer; stay alert in it with thanksgiving.*

Paul addressed all believers with instructions concerning prayer. They were to devote themselves prayer as opposed to praying occasionally in times of need. Paul didn't mean believers were to pray all the time but that they could and would pray anytime out of a close relationship with Christ. Paul used the general word for prayer that encompassed gratitude, confession, petition, and praise. Believers were to stay alert in prayer. Vigilant, perceptive prayer would guard against presumption, distraction, and mere performance of duty. Positively, perceptive prayer meant taking all of one's concerns to God. Believers' prayers were to be laden with thanksgiving — gratitude that God would hear and respond in ways best for the people praying.

Verse 3: *At the same time, pray also for us that God may open a door to us for the message, to speak the mystery of the Messiah, for which I am in prison—*

Paul asked believers to pray for him. The plural pronoun *us* may refer to Paul, to Paul and Timothy, or to Paul and all others with him in Rome. In any case, Paul asked believers to

petition God to give him an opportunity to preach the message — the good news of salvation in Christ. Paul wanted to continue to proclaim the mystery of the Messiah.

Verse 4: *so that I may reveal it as I am required to speak.*

God's once-hidden purpose — to include Gentiles in His family of faith — was now an open secret. Although Paul may have had in mind opportunities to tell the good news in prison, most likely he meant his release from prison so that he could resume spreading the gospel. This was the commission or mandate Christ had given him; in this sense, Paul was required to speak. The Greek word rendered *required* conveyed the sense of a moral, spiritual necessity.

Verse 5: *Act wisely toward outsiders, making the most of the time.*

Believers were to act wisely toward outsiders; they were to live with an acute consciousness of making a favorable impression on non-Christians to influence them with the gospel. They were to be wise in applying Christian principles in the practical matters of everyday conduct; that is, they were to use good sense in their behavior.

The phrase *making the most of the time* literally is “buying up the time.” The Greek word that means “buying up” came from the marketplace and was that day's equivalent of our “snatching up a bargain,” taking advantage of a good price. Believers were to seize every opportunity to present the gospel to non-Christians in the marketplace of daily life.

Verse 6: *Your speech should always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you should answer each person.*

Believers were to be careful in presenting the gospel to non-Christians. Their speech was to be consistently gracious. Because speech expressed believers' inner experience of grace, it was to be courteous, appealing, and tactful, expressing genuine care and contributing to others' good. Believers were never to “talk down” to non-Christians.

The phrase *seasoned with salt* could indicate that believers' witness was to (1) include winsome pleasantness, (2) be lively and interesting, (3) be acceptable and inoffensive, or (4) be wholesome and helpful. Clearly, effective Christian witnessing can contain combinations of these elements.

Believers in Colossae would encounter people of various types whose responses and questions would differ. Christians were to be prepared to fit their words to each person who asked about Christ and various elements of the gospel.

3. LIVE FAITHFULLY (COLOSSIANS 4:7-9)

Verse 7: *Tychicus, our dearly loved brother, faithful servant, and fellow slave in the Lord, will tell you all the news about me.*

Paul moved to final comments and greetings. He was sending Tychicus to deliver the letter. Tychicus had accompanied Paul on his third missionary journey. Paul commended him highly to the Colossian Christians. He was Paul's dearly loved brother in Christ. They shared God's kind of love as His children. Tychicus also was a faithful servant with Paul in Christ's work. Lastly, he was a fellow slave, who along with Paul was devoted to obeying Christ's directives.

Verse 8: *I have sent him to you for this very purpose, so that you may know how we are, and so that he may encourage your hearts.*

Paul's purpose in sending Tychicus to Colossae was twofold. Tychicus would deliver Paul's letter; then he would report verbally on how Paul was faring. Tychicus could give them far more information than Paul could write in his letter. The apostle wanted to assure and encourage the Colossian believers. No doubt, when Tychicus returned to Rome he would report to Paul concerning conditions in the Colossian church.

Verse 9: *He is with Onesimus, a faithful and dearly loved brother, who is one of you. They will tell you about everything here.*

Onesimus was a runaway slave from Colossae who made his way to Rome, came in contact with Paul, and became a Christian. Onesimus would accompany Tychicus to Colossae. Paul commended Onesimus as faithful, no longer to be viewed as an escaped slave and possibly a thief (see Philemon 18). Onesimus also was a loved brother, an equal in the body of Christ. With the phrase *who is one of you*, Paul not only indicated Onesimus was from Colossae but also that he was a member of their community of faith.

4. LIVE IN FELLOWSHIP (COLOSSIANS 4:10-13, 17)

Verse 10: *Aristarchus, my fellow prisoner, greets you, as does Mark, Barnabas's cousin (concerning whom you have received instructions: if he comes to you, welcome him),*

Paul sent greetings to the Colossian believers from people with him. Their greetings expressed their concern for the recipients. Aristarchus had been in Paul's missionary party in Ephesus during Paul's third missionary journey (see Acts 19:29), had accompanied Paul to Jerusalem with the offering

for poor Christians there (see Acts 20:4), and had been with Paul on the voyage to Rome (see Acts 27:2). Paul identified him as the apostle's fellow prisoner, either under house arrest with Paul, voluntarily sharing his confinement, or helping meet Paul's needs.

Mark was John Mark, Barnabas's cousin, who started out with Paul and Barnabas on the first missionary journey. Mark returned home (see Acts 13:4-5,13). Paul refused to take him along on the second missionary journey, so Mark went with Barnabas to Cyprus (see Acts 15:36-39). At some point, the relationship between Paul and Mark was restored, and he became Paul's valued coworker (see 2 Timothy 4:11).

Paul's request that believers welcome Mark if he came to them may indicate they knew of Mark's earlier departure from the missionary group or were aware of the resulting fractured relationship between Paul and Mark — or both.

Verse 11: *and so does Jesus who is called Justus. These alone of the circumcision are my coworkers for the kingdom of God, and they have been a comfort to me.*

The person referred to as Jesus ... Justus appears only here in the New Testament. Jesus (Joshua in Hebrew) was his Jewish name; Justus was his Roman name. He was a Jewish convert, for Paul included him along with Aristarchus and Mark as the only Jewish Christians in Rome who worked with Paul for the kingdom of God. They had been a comfort to Paul. The Greek term rendered *comfort* was a medical term that had the sense of relieving pain.

Verse 12: *Epaphras, who is one of you, a slave of Christ Jesus, greets you. He is always contending for you in his prayers, so that you can stand mature and fully assured in everything God wills.*

Epaphras had proclaimed the gospel in Colossae (1:7). He probably founded the church and likely served as pastor. Presently, he was with Paul and sent greetings to his friends. The phrase *one of you* may indicate he was a native of Colossae; at a minimum, it refers to his being a resident of the city and a member of the church. The phrase *slave of Christ Jesus* stressed Epaphras's commitment to Christ and his dedication to faithful ministry.

Paul assured the Colossian believers that Epaphras was always contending for them in his prayers. The Greek word translated *contending* conveyed the sense of strenuous exertion. The purpose of his fervent praying was that they would stand mature. He also prayed that they would have a

complete understanding of God's will. Thus, they wouldn't need the false teachers' promised illumination.

Verse 13: *For I testify about him that he works hard for you, for those in Laodicea, and for those in Hierapolis.*

Paul strongly affirmed that Epaphras worked hard not only for Christians in Colossae but also in the neighboring cities of Laodicea and Hierapolis. Paul's statement may refer to Epaphras's fervent praying for them or to his unrelenting efforts to combat the false teachings to which believers were being exposed.

In 4:14-16, Paul sent additional greetings — some to the Colossians from people with the apostle in Rome and other greetings to Christians in Laodicea. He also instructed that when his letter arrived, it would be read aloud to the congregation. Paul also had written a letter to the Laodicean church. The two churches also were to exchange letters (4:16).

Verse 17: *And tell Archippus, "Pay attention to the ministry you have received in the Lord, so that you can accomplish it."*

Archippus had a special ministry in the Colossian church, and a church member was to urge him to pay attention to his task to which the Lord had called him. The church member probably was to encourage Archippus to go on fulfilling his ministry.

Paul ended his letter by writing a greeting, asking the Colossian Christians to keep his situation in mind and giving a benediction. He closed the letter as he began: with a prayer that believers receive God's grace.

BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR MAY 29

PHILEMON 1-25

THE BACKGROUND

Paul wrote to Philemon on behalf of a runaway slave who was returning to Colossae. Paul had won Onesimus to Christ, so the slave also was coming to the Colossian church as a new member.

Paul identified himself as the writer and included Timothy in his greeting (v. 1a). Paul specified the recipients and expressed a prayer for them (v. 1b-3). Then he commended Philemon for his faith in Christ and his love for all believers (v. 4-7).

In verses 8-22, Paul appealed to Philemon to forgive Onesimus. With apostolic authority, Paul could've commanded Philemon to receive Onesimus graciously, but the apostle made a request based on love (v. 9). Paul had wanted to keep Onesimus with him but was sending him back to Philemon (v. 10-14). Paul emphasized that Onesimus wasn't returning as a slave but as Philemon's Christian brother (v. 15-16).

Paul urged Philemon to receive Onesimus as he would receive the apostle. If Onesimus had stolen anything when he fled, Paul would repay the debt (v. 17-19). Paul expressed confidence Philemon would do as the apostle asked and expressed his desire to visit Philemon (v. 20-22). Paul closed with greetings and a benediction (v. 23-25).

1. REMEMBER YOUR IDENTITY (PHILEMON 1, 3-7)

Verse 1: *Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother: To Philemon our dear friend and coworker,*

Paul first identified himself as the writer. He wasn't a prisoner of the Romans but a prisoner of Christ Jesus. Because of his faithfulness in spreading the gospel to Gentiles, his Jewish opponents had him arrested and forced him to appeal to Caesar for a fair trial (see Acts 25:10-11). Paul included Timothy in his greeting, probably not as the letter's scribe but as his fellow Christian and coworker. Paul listed Philemon first as the letter's primary recipient. Paul addressed him as a dear friend — one who labored in Christ's cause with Paul. Philemon would make the critical decision about Onesimus's reception and future.

Verse 3: *Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

Paul extended his usual prayer for the recipients. The pro-

noun *you* is plural. Grace is God's love in action, His unmerited favor. *Peace* is spiritual soundness under God's rule. Receiving God's grace issues in wholeness in relationship with Him. God is the Heavenly Father of people who have placed their faith in Christ. God's grace and peace come through the Lord Jesus Christ.

Verse 4: *I always thank my God when I mention you in my prayers,*

Following his usual pattern, Paul expressed thanksgiving. He may have meant that every time Philemon's name surfaced as he prayed, Paul expressed gratitude for him. A second possibility is that Paul consistently prayed for Philemon, and when he did he always thanked God. The phrase *my God* stressed Paul's close relationship with God.

Verse 5: *because I hear of your love and faith toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints.*

The stimulus for Paul's gratitude for Philemon was the report of Philemon's love and faith toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints. If the phrase *love and faith* applies both to Christ and to all the saints, then faith here has the sense of faithfulness. I think it more likely, however, that faith has reference to Philemon's commitment to and trust in Christ. The word *love* likely refers to his determined good will for all other believers. The word *saints* means "separated ones" — people set apart for God's service and holy living. It's a synonym for the term *Christians*.

Verse 6: *I pray that your participation in the faith may become effective through knowing every good thing that is in us for the glory of Christ.*

This verse gives the content of Paul's prayers for Philemon and lays the groundwork for Paul's request of him. Onesimus, Philemon's slave, had run away from Colossae. He well may have stolen something before fleeing (v. 18). Onesimus journeyed to Rome and met Paul, who led him to become a Christian. Rather than keep Onesimus with him, Paul was sending him back to Philemon. The apostle was sending his letter with Onesimus with an appeal on his behalf.

Paul prayed that Philemon's participation in the faith might become effective. The Greek word rendered *participation* often is translated "fellowship" and has the sense of partnership in a common enterprise or goal. The term *faith* likely referred again to Philemon's personal trust in Christ that motivated his love "for all the saints" (v. 5). Paul wanted Philemon to activate his faith-driven generosity on Onesimus's behalf.

Philemon's participation in the faith concerning Onesimus would spring from Philemon's knowing every good thing that was in believers for the glory of Christ. The Greek word translated *knowing* conveys the sense of full, personal knowledge gained through experience. Philemon's decision and action concerning Onesimus would be affected by Philemon's understanding of the good qualities of Christian character, one of which is forgiveness.

Likely, the phrase *for the glory of Christ* refers primarily to Philemon's partnership in the faith becoming effectual. It also may refer to Philemon's knowing God's good gifts to the church and acting on the grace of forgiveness. Either way, Philemon's pardoning Onesimus would glorify Christ, who modeled forgiveness.

Verse 7: *For I have great joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, brother.*

Reports of Philemon's Christian love gave Paul great joy and encouraged him. The apostle was counting on Philemon's extending that love to Onesimus. Addressing Philemon warmly as a brother in Christ, Paul commended him for his ministry to the saints. Philemon had refreshed their hearts. The word *refreshed* conveys the idea of enabling others to enjoy temporary rest from labor in order to recover and gather strength. The term *hearts* referred to the seat of emotions and will — the heart, lungs, and liver. Philemon had invigorated other Christians. Paul wanted him to refresh Onesimus's heart in the same way.

2. BE KNOWN BY YOUR LOVE (PHILEMON 8-13)

Verse 8: *For this reason, although I have great boldness in Christ to command you to do what is right,*

Here Paul began his appeal for Onesimus. The phrase *for this reason* translates a Greek term that means "therefore" and refers to evidences of Philemon's love and graciousness. Paul could've commanded Philemon to forgive Onesimus. The words *great boldness in Christ* emphasized Paul's apostolic authority. As Christ's emissary, Paul spoke and acted in Christ's authority. He reminded Philemon that he was foregoing his right to demand obedience. The phrase *what is right* referred to Philemon's accepting Onesimus as a Christian brother.

Verse 9: *I appeal to you, instead, on the basis of love. I, Paul, as an elderly man and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus, Instead of making a demand, Paul appealed to Philemon*

on the basis of love. Love was a dominant characteristic of Philemon's life, and Paul wanted him to extend that love to Onesimus.

Paul referred to himself as an elderly man and a prisoner of Christ Jesus. This description might've been designed to pull at Philemon's heartstrings. On the other hand, Paul could've been reinforcing his authority as a Christian elder statesman who was suffering because of his faithfulness to Christ. Either way, he laid the groundwork for his appeal for Onesimus.

Verse 10: *appeal to you for my son, Onesimus. I fathered him while I was in chains.*

Paul appealed to Philemon for his son, whom he fathered while in chains. In confinement, Paul had won a new convert to Christ. After establishing his close relationship with the new Christian, Paul gave the convert's name — Onesimus. We only can imagine Philemon's shock.

Verse 11: *Once he was useless to you, but now he is useful both to you and to me.*

Paul employed an effective word-play on the name Onesimus. The name means "profitable" or "helpful." As Philemon's slave, he hadn't lived up to his name. By running away, he had shown himself to be useless. Christ had transformed Onesimus, however, so that he was useful to both Philemon and Paul.

Verse 12: *I am sending him back to you as a part of myself.*

Although Paul was sending Onesimus home, the letter gives no indication that Onesimus was returning against his will. The phrase *a part of myself* expresses Paul's strong emotional tie to Onesimus and is the equivalent of "my heart."

Verse 13: *I wanted to keep him with me, so that in my imprisonment for the gospel he might serve me in your place.*

Paul wanted to keep Onesimus with him. Evidently, Onesimus already had rendered valuable assistance to Paul. Again, the apostle stressed his imprisonment was for the gospel — because of his missions ministry. If Onesimus stayed, he could serve Paul in Philemon's place — on Philemon's behalf. Paul could've justified keeping Onesimus with him on the grounds that Onesimus really was representing Philemon, who thus was rendering service to Paul.

3. FOCUS ON GOD'S REDEMPTION (PHILEMON 14-16)

Verse 14: *But I didn't want to do anything without your consent, so that your good deed might not be out of obligation, but of your own free will.*

Paul could've kept Onesimus and merely have informed

Philemon that he had done so. He wouldn't make that choice, however, without Philemon's consent. Paul wanted Philemon's good deed to be done willingly, not out of duty.

Verse 15: *For perhaps this is why he was separated from you for a brief time, so that you might get him back permanently,*

Paul saw the possibility of a positive result from what appeared to be a negative situation. Everything hinged on Philemon's forgiving Onesimus. Onesimus's separation from Philemon for a brief time resulted in the slave's conversion. Now Philemon would get him back permanently in a new relationship — an eternal relationship.

Verse 16: *no longer as a slave, but more than a slave—as a dearly loved brother. He is especially so to me, but even more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.*

Paul didn't direct Philemon to set Onesimus free but opened the door to the possibility. Paul urged Philemon to welcome Onesimus home and — by implication — to forgive him. Paul wanted Philemon to receive Onesimus no longer as a slave, but more than a slave. Onesimus had been mere property. Now Philemon was to accept Onesimus as a dearly loved brother — a fellow Christian toward whom Philemon was to extend God's kind of love.

4. BEAR THE INJURY (PHILEMON 17-22)

Verse 17: *So if you consider me a partner, accept him as you would me.*

The word *if* has the force of "because." Paul assumed Philemon considered him as a partner — a collaborator in Christ's service. The apostle made his direct appeal: He wanted Philemon to accept Onesimus in the same manner as Philemon would receive Paul if he were to visit.

Verse 18: *And if he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account.*

Again, the term *if* has the sense of "because." Onesimus had wronged Philemon and owed him something. Onesimus may have stolen money to fund his getaway. Philemon may have entrusted him with money to make purchases. Whatever the case, Onesimus was indebted to Philemon.

Verse 19: *I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it—not to mention to you that you owe me even your own self.*

Paul used financial terms to indicate his willingness to assume Onesimus's debt. Philemon could charge Onesimus's debt to Paul's account. In effect, he signed a promissory note in his own handwriting. He would pay what Onesimus owed. Paul reminded Philemon that he owed the apostle

even his own self. Philemon likely became a Christian because Epaphras, Paul's coworker, had taken the gospel to Colossae. So indirectly, Paul was instrumental in Philemon's conversion. That should've been more than enough to cover Onesimus's debt.

Verse 20: *Yes, brother, may I have joy from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ.*

The Greek particle rendered *yes* gathers up the entire previous request on behalf of Onesimus. *Brother* was a warm term of Christian relationship. In verse 16, Paul referred to Onesimus as "brother." The implication is that if Onesimus and Philemon were Paul's Christian brothers, they also were brothers to each other. The phrase *let me have joy* literally is "may I have profit" and is a play on the name Onesimus. Onesimus was profitable to Paul; Philemon could be equally as profitable. Paul's request was in the sphere of Christ's love and grace, in which he and Philemon lived.

Philemon's welcoming and forgiving Onesimus would refresh Paul's heart. Paul was asking Philemon to do for him what Philemon was doing for other believers (v. 7). The word *refresh* has the sense of rest, relief, and encouragement.

Verse 21: *Since I am confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.*

Paul was convinced of Philemon's obedience to the apostle's request. Paul didn't assert his apostolic authority (v. 8-9) but instead asked that Philemon graciously grant his request.

Paul added his confidence that Philemon would do even more than the apostle asked. Did Paul imply that Philemon set Onesimus free so he could return to Rome? Certainly Paul referred to Onesimus's being treated fairly.

Verse 22: *But meanwhile, also prepare a guest room for me, for I hope that through your prayers I will be restored to you.*

On the surface, Paul merely asked Philemon to prepare lodging in anticipation of a future visit. Underneath may be the implication that Paul well might come and check to see whether Philemon had granted the request for Onesimus. Throughout the letter, Paul gently and tactfully nudged Philemon to do what was right.